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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002145

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: VOTER REGISTRATION TO BEGIN AT LAST

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The 30-day voter registration process will start on July 15. Potential problems include lack of accessibility and lack of information. We have been working with UNAMI and the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) for months to forestall such problems. There have been concerns that Sunni areas are under-served by voter registration centers. IHEC has already established 15 additional registration centers, and if problems occur during the registration period, potential fixes include extending the voter registration period, providing mobile registration vans, and splitting staff from existing registrations centers to create additional sub-centers. We see no evidence that there is a concerted effort to prevent Sunnis from registering. We are also working with IHEC to ensure that their public outreach campaign is timely and effective.

Voter Registration Is Set To Begin

¶2. (C) Voter registration has been announced as starting on July 15 and will last for 30 days. Logistical preparations are on track: voter registration center staff training is nearing completion, and all voter registration materials have been delivered and are in the process of being sent to the 564 voter registration centers, including the provisional voter lists derived from the Public Distribution System (PDS, the nationwide food ration database), the internally displaced persons (IDP) list, and the voter registration forms. Now the focus shifts to ensuring the success and credibility of the registration process, and addressing complaints about unfairness. The major issues there are accessibility of the voter registration centers and effectiveness of the public outreach campaign.

¶3. (C) In considering problems with voter registration, a key point to remember is that this is actually an update/verification of the voter registration list. Iraqi citizens are automatically registered if they are on the PDS list, as 96% of Iraqis are according to the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). If people are confident that they're on the PDS list, they don't have to do anything to register. It is only if they are not on the PDS list, need to correct their personal information, or just want to check their listings that they must actually go to the voter registration center. IDPs will be allowed to register in their current location, but the question of whether they will vote for candidates from their place of origin or place of displacement is still unresolved (it will be defined in the provincial elections law still under debate in the Council of Representatives).

Accessibility of Registration Centers

¶4. (C) Accessibility includes both location of the voter registration center (i.e. comprehensive and equitable

distribution of the sites) and ensuring people's physical security in getting there. For months, concerns have been raised that in mixed-sect provinces like Ninewa, Baghdad, and north Babil, Sunni populations are under-served by voter registration centers and that there is a risk that Sunnis may therefore be underrepresented among registered voters. The PRTs and divisions on the ground out in the provinces have sent in specifics about regions of concern; we passed those to UNAMI (which has the lead in the international community's support for elections); and UNAMI conferred with IHEC to come up with solutions. Although IHEC subsequently established an additional 15 voter registration sub-centers, only a few were in areas that reports had indicated were under-served. We are continuing to monitor the situation, and as we get additional specific information from the field, UNAMI will raise the problems with IHEC, which is the only body in Iraq with the jurisdiction to enforce penalties and remedies relating to election violations.

15. (C) As the 30-day voter registration process moves along, IHEC is prepared to take a variety of steps -- if necessary -- to mitigate accessibility problems: extending the voter registration period, providing mobile registration vans, and splitting staff from existing registration centers to create additional sub-centers. In addition, voters can check their registration by calling a telephone call-in center and IHEC is attempting to set up online verification of registration, options which can help reduce accessibility problems. We will also be alert to any complaints about security, both in terms of there being not enough and too much (for example, sectarian efforts to prevent certain groups or people from getting to the registration centers). IHEC will also follow

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up on such complaints, of course.

16. (C) Comment: We do not believe that there is a concerted effort to cut the Sunnis out of the voter registration process; rather it is an unintended result of a number of factors. Some under-representation may be a result of the large-scale displacement after the February 2006 Samarra mosque bombing that created Sunni-Shia segregation in many areas. Thus centers that once served multiple neighborhoods of different sects are now located in segregated areas. Some Sunni areas may have ended up with fewer registration centers because non-participants in the PDS are likely to be wealthy Sunnis, and so areas with large concentrations of that population might not have been captured by a registration center distribution based on the PDS. We also have to remember that this voter registration exercise will involve much "learning as you go" for IHEC. UNAMI has already told us that the process barely meets international standards, but they understand the imperative to get registration done in a timely fashion, imperfect though it may be. The lessons learned from provincial elections in 2008 will be put to good use in the lead-up to national elections in 2009. Naturally, we are continuing to be alert to accusations of bias and the like, but so far we have not seen any evidence that there is an explicit effort to keep Sunnis off the electoral rolls. End comment.

Public Outreach

17. (C) The IHEC campaign to inform Iraqi citizens of the voter registration update exercise was always planned to begin ten days before registration starts. IHEC did indeed begin publicizing registration on July 5 and held a major press conference on July 7 to really kick off the process. We have had continuing concerns about IHEC's ability to produce and disseminate material (flyers, posters, billboards, TV and radio spots) quickly enough to reach significant numbers of voters. Over the past few months we have worked closely with UNAMI to make sure that IHEC is on track.

18. (C) Both UNAMI and IFES (the implementer through which USAID funds its considerable technical support to IHEC) have media advisors imbedded in IHEC's media department, and we provided printing facilities, at IHEC's request, to print an initial 500,000 flyers and paid for a scrolling text information campaign on television. We have also been working with the PRTs to come up with ways we can help the Iraqis create a multiplier effect in distributing materials and getting the word out. For example, the PRTs are working with local NGOs and civic groups to help them find ways to take IHEC-provided material such as information pamphlets and reproduce and distribute them. This includes coming up with QRF funding proposals to support such efforts.

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